


EDUCATION

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S M A L L Miracles

A culturally responsive, relationship-based approach helps a rural Idaho high school create "on-ramps" for at-risk, limited English proficient students.

Story and photos by BRACKEN REED

BURLEY, Idaho—When Yolanda Sapien took over the program for limited English proficient (LEP) students at Burley High School more than a decade ago, she had five students. Today, she has 118. The difference is not one of population growth or shifting demographics. The real explanation, according to Sapien, is that "back then, those students were dropping like flies." Now, they are not.

Visit one of Sapien's tutorials for LEP students today and you'll see a jam-packed classroom in which students are hard at work making up missed assignments, doing homework, or taking online credit retrieval courses. These students are not only staying in school, they're earning their diplomas and, in many cases, becoming the first generation of their families to attend college. Sapien refers to more than a few of them as "one of our miracles."

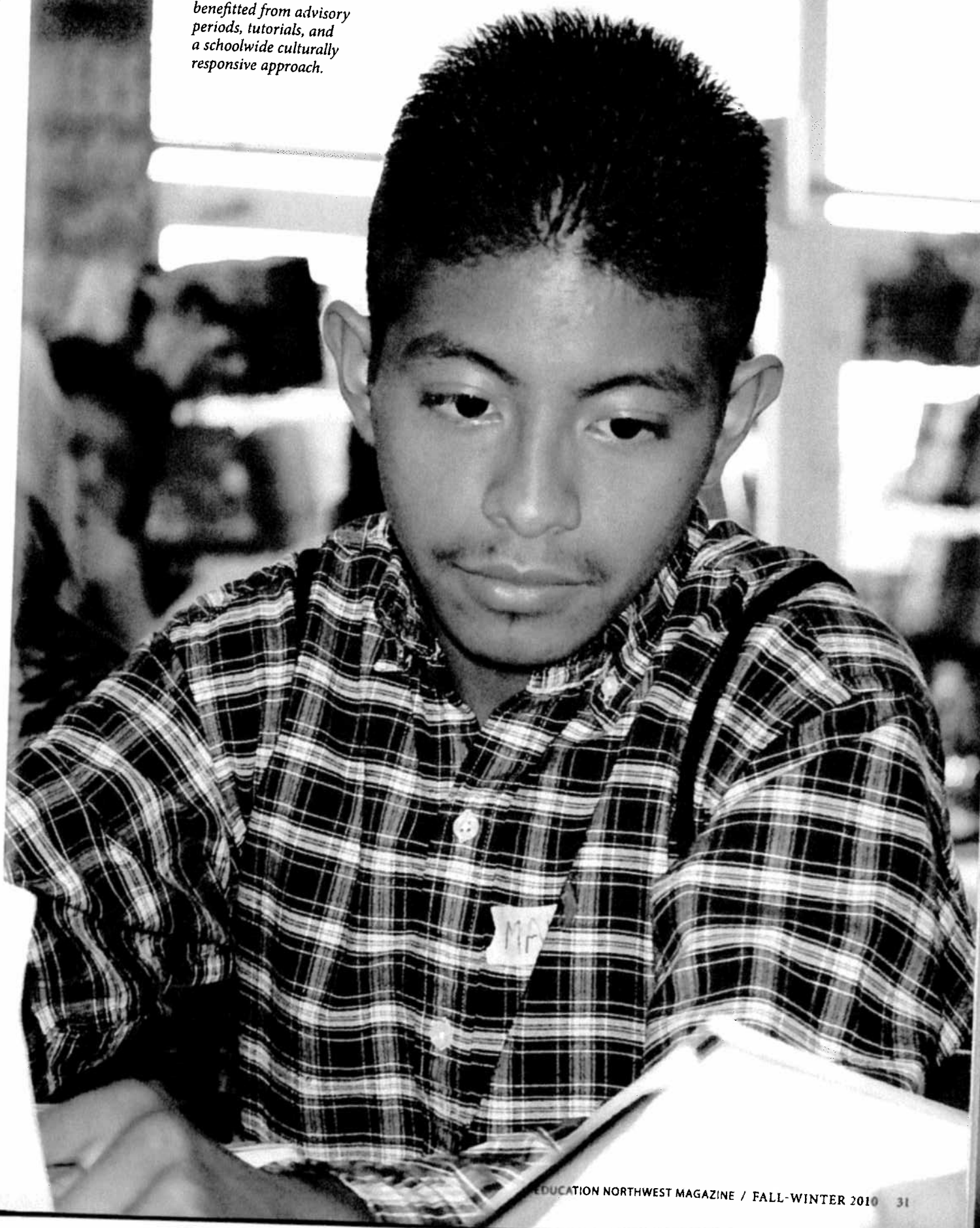
Those miracles have not happened overnight. Until recently the school's LEP program was a piecemeal effort, hampered by frequent turnover in the school's leadership, including six different principals in the last 10 years. Each of those principals helped implement key aspects of the school's current approach, but a unified vision and a schoolwide system of support remained elusive. Creating that vision and putting that system in place has been a long and not entirely painless process that has required nothing less than a change in the culture of the school.

Everyone's Kids

Burley is a farming town of approximately 9,300, nestled along both sides of the Snake River in the southern part of Idaho. The area is known for its many sugar beet farms, a crop that until recently required significant manual labor to plant, cultivate, and harvest. For several decades that labor has been carried out primarily by Latinos, many of whom have stayed and have, in turn, encouraged other family members to come to the area. As a result, nearly all of Burley High School's LEP students are Latino.

Nationally, Latino students have the lowest graduation rates—and highest

*Burley High School's
LEP students have
benefitted from advisory
periods, tutorials, and
a schoolwide culturally
responsive approach.*





The child of migrant workers, Yolanda Sapien has spent her professional career advocating for Latino students.

dropout rates—of any ethnic group. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2008 the Latino dropout rate for students ages 16 to 24, was 18 percent, compared to 9.9 percent for black students and less than 5 percent for both white and Asian/Pacific Islander students. Only American Indian/Alaska Native students, at 14.6, have a similar dropout rate. In 2004, despite comprising only 19 percent of all students ages 16 to 24, Latino students accounted for 40 percent of all dropouts.

Yolanda Sapien knows what it's like to see your own life represented in those statistics. Sapien, who is now only a few years from retirement, is herself the child of migrant farm workers who came to the Burley area when she was a child. Despite dropping out of school and becoming a mother at 16, Sapien eventually went on to finish high school and to earn both bachelor's and master's degrees. Her own story is a miracle in itself, and she has dedicated her career to helping Latino students. At Burley High, she serves as both the English as a Second Language (ESL) coordinator, for students who have few or no English skills, and as director of the LEP program, which serves students with some English skills but who still qualify for extra support, based on their scores on an English proficiency test. When Sapien looks at the students in those programs, she sees herself.

However, for many years, one of the problems with Burley High's LEP program was that many staff members looked at those same students and did not see themselves. In fact, it was not uncommon to hear the LEP students referred to as "Yolanda's kids," rather than everyone's. There was nothing malicious about it. At the time, most LEP students took very few

courses in mainstream classrooms, and many teachers had little or no contact with them.

"Nobody Cared"

Real change began to take shape under Principal Jodie Mills, who held the reins for two years, from fall 2007 to spring 2009. Current Principal Carolyn Hondo served as vice principal during that time and together with other staff leaders Mills and Hondo began to push the school in a more "culturally responsive" direction. This included embracing Latino students' culture, mainstreaming LEP students as much as possible, and encouraging the entire staff to shift its view of LEP students from "those are Yolanda's kids" to "these are *our* kids."

Although Dr. Hondo, as she is called by both staff and students, is quick to deflect the credit—pointing to the many programs started by her predecessors and to the incredible dedication of Sapien—it is under her leadership that the school's current approach has come to fruition.

It's a role she was uniquely prepared to play. Before earning her Ph.D. and moving into administration, Hondo taught elementary and middle school for more than two decades, including 15 years as a first-grade teacher and seven as a seventh-grade teacher. During those years in the classroom, nearly all of them spent in rural Idaho, she saw many intelligent and formerly successful students lose interest in school and head down a path that often led to dropping out. And the overwhelming majority of those students were Latino.

"In my experience, almost all kids have a fire to learn when they first come to school," Hondo says. "They come to school wanting to learn and getting so excited about little things, and then somewhere along the way they lose it. I saw that and I started asking myself: What happens that makes it easy for them to step off the train?"

That question led Hondo not only into high school administration, but also to focus her doctoral study on the Latino dropout problem. Her dissertation eventually resulted in a book-length project, coauthored by Hondo, Sapien, and Mary Gardiner, a professor of educational leadership at the University of Idaho Boise. The State University of New York Press published their *Latino Dropouts in Rural America: Realities and Responsibilities* in 2008.

At the heart of the book is a case study based on interviews and site visits at three rural Idaho high schools, and in particular, on interviews conducted with nine Latino students who had dropped out of school. Hondo makes no claim that the book is based on scientific research. It provides experiential evidence as well as a survey of existing research and lays out a practical plan for implementing the type of culturally responsive approach that Hondo would later help bring to Burley High.

One of the central messages Hondo herself took from the experience was the importance of relationships. "That's the thing that came out over and over in the book: Nobody cared, nobody cared," she says. "They didn't feel connected to the school. They didn't feel accepted. They had no meaningful relationship with anyone at the school."

Building On-Ramps

Another important concept that Hondo picked up during her doctoral study came from a passage in Donna Walker Tileston's book *Ten Best Teaching Practices: How Brain Research, Learning Styles, and Standards Define Teaching Competencies*:

Schools provide on-ramps when they lead students to know that if they fail, if they make a mistake, if they break a rule, they can overcome it. I am convinced that we could save quite a few students if they knew that a mistake does not mean there is no hope.

The first on-ramp Hondo helped build after coming to Burley was the decision to move LEP students into the mainstream classroom as much as possible. "Any time you segregate kids, by language or cognitive ability or whatever, you are creating a potential off-ramp," says Hondo. "They automatically feel less connected to the school, and in many cases the school feels less connected to them."

Burley High still has a small English as a Second Language (ESL) program for students with almost no English skills, as well as a resource room for students with special needs, but the goal is to get as many students as possible into general education classes, while still providing necessary accommodations. It's an approach that is the norm in most elementary schools, says Hondo, but one that typically disappears at the secondary level. For that reason, it can be a hard sell.

"It was difficult for some teachers to change their way of thinking," admits Hondo. "I'd be lying if I said we've had 100 percent buy-in. But most of our staff has embraced it, and we're seeing the success of kids as a result."

Perhaps the biggest on-ramp of all has been the attempt to encourage a culturally responsive approach throughout the school. In their book, Hondo, Sapien, and Gardiner use the following definition, taken from the Education Alliance's website on teaching diverse learners:

[Culturally responsive teaching is:] an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and

politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' own cultures.

"They have a home here," is the way Sapien describes how this plays out in the school. "They're allowed to speak their language in the hallways and at lunchtime. Their culture is not just accepted, it's embraced. And that starts with Dr. Hondo."

It's a responsibility that Hondo has fully accepted. "The leaders of a school have to model that kind of caring and send the message that it's important and here is why," she says. "You have to keep saying it, over and over again: This is important."

As Hondo knows, saying it is not enough, you also have to put it into action. As principal, she has shown that commitment on a daily basis: "I'm telling you: She stays after school, she works directly with those kids," says Sapien. "If I can't provide something, then she provides it. She takes a personal interest in every one of these students."

Hondo has also shown that commitment through her hiring practices and resource allocations. For example, she recently hired a new vice principal, Levi Powers, who is fluent in Spanish. In addition, she now provides Sapien with two full-time, Spanish-speaking paraeducators, Veronica Granillo and Judy Martinez. The school also recently purchased eight new computers for Sapien's LEP classroom, an essential resource for students who typically do not have access to computers at home.

A System of Support

During the past four years, the commitment to LEP students has gradually been woven into the fabric of the school. And, several of the strategies are equally effective for non-LEP students. For example, all students have a daily, 30-minute advisory period. Every teacher has one advisory class and is typically responsible for about 16 students. Students stay with the same advisory teacher for the entire year. Even the nine ESL students, who otherwise spend the entire day with Sapien, are

(Left) Forced to drop out of school in order to help support his family, Mauro Ramirez has since been able to retrieve lost credits and is back on track to graduate. (Right) Miguel Magaña has made a remarkable turnaround, from skipping school and nearly dropping out to looking forward to graduation and attending college.





In the past four years Principal Carolyn Hondo has helped change the culture of Burley High School, bringing her doctoral studies in culturally responsive leadership to bear in the real world of a high-minority, high-poverty rural school.

mainstreamed into an advisory class.

Advisory class provides both academic support and a social skills curriculum, but one of its biggest impacts has been to increase the schoolwide commitment to LEP students. The school purposely mixes up the teacher/student assignments, so that teachers have students they might not otherwise get to know. "In one way it's an academic support," says Hondo. "It's another pair of eyes keeping track of a student's grades, missed assignments, behavior, and attendance. They can catch things that might go unnoticed. But in another way, it's about relationships. It helps build the connection between the staff and the students."

All LEP and ESL students also have one full, 85-minute block of tutorial every other day, taught by Sapien and her two paraeducators. The tutorial is similar to advisory class, in that it's a way of keeping close track of a student's attendance, behavior, and missed assignments, but it is more heavily focused on academics. Sapien currently has three LEP tutorial classes, as well as two periods set aside as tutorial for her ESL students.

The tutorial periods are closely linked to the schoolwide "no zeros" policy. This policy has been one of the most challenging to implement because of the requirements it puts on classroom teachers. Each teacher is responsible for inputting data, as often as possible, on the students in his or her class, including whether they are absent or tardy and whether they have any missing assignments. This data is available to Sapien, Granillo, and Martinez every day, and it is their job to go over it with each student and, if necessary, to call parents regarding absences or missed assignments. As part of the policy, LEP and ESL students are given an extra 10 days to complete most assignments.

The policy to give LEP/ESL student extra time to complete assignments did not initially sit well with some teachers, in part because of the extra data entry requirements, but also because some perceived it to be a kind of affirmative action program that created a separate system of accountability for LEP and

ESL students. For the most part, these concerns have been overcome as teachers have seen the positive impact for students. "Many of the teachers share the philosophy now," says Sapien. "They understand that these students just don't have the resources at home. They don't have computers, and their parents often don't have the educational background to be able to help them. The teachers understand that we're trying to give them every opportunity to complete the assignment."

Finding Success

For senior Mauro Ramirez, the LEP tutorial period and the "no zeros" policy have made a huge difference. "That's one of the best things about this school," he says. "They make sure that you turn everything in on time. They keep you on track and give you whatever help you need to get it done. Without it, it's so easy to fall behind."

Due to family circumstances, Mauro missed almost a year and a half of school during his freshman and sophomore years when his family moved from Arizona to Tacoma, Washington, and eventually to Burley. He was forced to hold down full-time jobs in order to help make ends meet. After coming to Burley and spending some time in the beet fields, he pleaded with his parents to let him return to high school. By taking summer school classes, afterschool "night classes," and online credit retrieval courses he is now on track to graduate and even hopes to attend the local College of Southern Idaho, if he can find a way to pay the tuition.

Mauro remembers sitting down with Principal Hondo when he first inquired about coming back to school. "I liked the way she explained everything to me," he says. "She let me know what I was going to have to do to graduate and that it would be hard work, but they would support me. And they have. They made me feel like it was possible."

Miguel Magaña is another student who Sapien points to as a remarkable example of how a student can turn things around with the right support. After missing nearly an entire year of school and being on the verge of dropping out, a family trip to Mexico helped him regain his focus. "I realized how hard it was for people there and how lucky we are," he says. "I wanted to take advantage of the opportunities I had." When he returned to school with renewed commitment, he was not judged or told he would never be able to graduate with his class. Instead, the school helped him map out a plan, and then they provided support every step of the way. After a lot of hard work, Miguel is back on track to graduate this spring and will most likely attend Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, next year.

A decade ago, students like Mauro and Miguel probably wouldn't have found their way to graduation. Today, their accomplishments are only two of the many small miracles Yolanda Sapien sees in her classroom every day. "LEP used to be just a program," she says. "That's all it was. It wasn't really about the kids. Now it is. We're doing what we're supposed to do, which is to give each and every student the best possible chance to succeed." ■